

"Wreaths have served as important symbols for millennia. At the first Olympics, wreaths were used to crown the victors at the games. Romans used wreaths to confer respect and value on people of importance to arts, literature, education and government. And we use wreaths today as tidings of the Christmas season - the arrival of winter, our preparations for holidays, and in anticipation of a blessed time to treasure our families, friends and good fortune.

All of these meanings can be wrapped up in the ceremony held Saturday at the Bloomfield Veterans Cemetery and at cemeteries throughout the country. As part of a program called Wreaths Across America, veterans groups and civic organizations place fir wreaths on the memorial markers of veterans from coast to coast.

The symbol is a good one. Like in Roman times, the wreaths extend a symbolic respect for the contributions of our veterans to the fabric of our American society. Our veterans are leaders in the community, and they make invaluable contributions in their places of work, to their families, and through the continuing tradition of military service that marks our patriotic way of life in Southern Missouri.

And just as the Greeks once crowned their victors in the Olympics, our holiday wreaths which adorn these gravesites are a commemoration of the victory our veterans have won for our nation in the world. The ideals of freedom, liberty and security are tied directly to the service and the sacrifice of Americans in uniform.

But most important, in the holiday season the placement of a wreath reminds us that some of our families will be remembering a loved one around a table at Christmas dinner. It is a small opportunity to include our veterans in our holiday traditions, placing the men and women who serve our country in uniform in a prominent place among the blessings we are grateful for at this time of year. And it reminds us simply that we are a blessed nation of patriots.

Finally, the circular shape of the wreath is a sign that we are part of an unending cycle of life and service in faith. Other nations rise and fall, but our thirst for freedom, our insistence on individual liberties, and our struggle to preserve these blessings for future generations are all constants.

I couldn't be more proud to be present at the ceremony to lay the graveside wreaths at the veterans cemetery in Bloomfield. It's a sober memorial with a beautiful visual - hundreds upon hundreds of wreaths spread over the landscape.

Ordinarily, the Bloomfield cemetery would be a cold and lonely place on the second week of December. With the addition of the wreaths, the remembrance of our veterans, and the crowd of people from our Southern Missouri communities who brave the weather to honor them, however, the veterans cemetery possesses a warmth like no other place in the nation on a cold Saturday morning.

As we honor our veterans and the long tradition in which they serve our nation, the holidays are

a special time to acknowledge the important blessing they are to us individually as families, and collectively an American people."